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Role of Literary Texts in Improving Writing Skills

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Abstract

The current paper deals with the identification of the role of English literary texts in ESL classroom intended for the improvement of writing skills at elementary level. Qualitative approach was used in this study. Data was collected through document analysis and open-ended questionnaires. Six teachers who taught literary texts in ESL classroom were selected to fill the questionnaires. Twenty specimens of ESL learners' classwork were analyzed using ESL Profile Composition (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981, p.30). This research offered promising results regarding the beneficial role of literary texts in improving writing skills. It also paves the way for future researchers to further investigate the role of literary texts in the learning of English language.

Keywords: ESL classroom, grammar, language learning, literary texts, writing skills

Introduction

In an ESL (English as a second language) classroom, writing is thought of as the most difficult but a very significant skill. ESL learners need ample time for developing writing skills. ESL learners, especially the younger ones, are confronted with much difficulty in the process of writing while learning the spellings, punctuation, sentence structure etc. and in developing and organizing ideas. It is very important to have a subject for all types of composition. The assignments based on the reading of literature can be helpful in giving confidence to students to write about their own feeling and/or the world at large quite easily.

Language educators have different opinions regarding the role of literature in language learning which have evolved over time (Delanoy, 1997). Considerable significance was given to literature in language teaching under the influence of structuralists and formalists. Literature was considered not only as a model of language use but it was also considered as a body of knowledge that gave subject matter to language. Delanoy (1997) noted that following the criticism of the

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supporters of the functional approach, literature was not only separated from language teaching but it was also excluded from it.

The teaching of literary texts in ESL classroom has recently reemerged as a very important element of English language teaching (Duff & Maley, [2007](#)). Literature has been getting impetus as a rich resource of language learning since the mid-1980s (Duff & Maley, [1991](#)).

Today, literature is viewed as a suitable medium for language learning and development because the focus has shifted to authentic language use in an authentic situation. Widdowson ([1971](#)) claimed that literature not only provides the examples of language use but also provides the context for language use.

In learning English as a second language, writing is a very significant component. Its significance results from the reinforcement of vocabulary, idiom and grammatical structures that we teach our students. In order to develop writing skills, it is necessary to identify students' interests and expose them to the situations in which they are interested; only then they will be able to produce a valid piece of writing. According to Littlewood ([2000](#)), a major problem which language classrooms confront is to create an authentic situation for language teaching and learning and he stressed the importance of literary texts for this purpose.

1.1. Research Interest

The research has the following objectives:

1. To find out whether students enjoy reading literary texts while studying at elementary level.
2. To find out how students build their vocabulary, ideas and develop syntax through literary texts in an ESL classroom.
3. To find out whether literary texts improve the writing skills and written expression of ESL learners.
4. To find out whether literary texts expose students to different features of written language.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Writing is an important component of language learning in an ESL classroom; it needs to receive more attention in order to enable learners to get by the demands of real life communicative situations. However, students' writing skill can be developed and they can produce a genuine piece of writing only when they are exposed to those situations in which they are interested. Literature is a great source of providing linguistic opportunities; it not only provides indispensable language

learning opportunities but also stimulates learners' personal intellectual growth. In this regard, the current study is the investigation of the practices which influence the writing skills of students studying literary texts in language classroom at elementary level in District Lahore.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research will contribute to the importance of using literature in ESL/EFL classroom for the improvement of writing skills of the ESL/EFL learners. Carter and McRae (2001, p. 10) suggest that the use of literature can help students in “acquiring basic knowledge of the language” and “learning about the language and how it works,” because the use of literary texts is a great source for developing the “fourth” skill in language. In order to teach language areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, as well as four language skills, that is, reading, writing, listening and speaking, the use of literature is a popular technique in the field of ESL learning and teaching.

The findings of the study will be significant for the practitioners, curriculum designers and teachers teaching the English language at elementary level. It will help them to better understand the effects of incorporating literary texts into ELT curriculum for the improvement of writing skills.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Literature can be viewed and defined in various ways. This, however, depends upon different factors such as the function of literature and its use in the English language classroom.

When we take literature as a subject of study, it becomes an activity which includes language use (Radhika, 1991). It focuses on the quality of a presented text.

A literary work may take readers beyond their own time and culture to a different temporal and social scenario. There is also the plausible and motivating aspect of literature (Clandfield, 2006), as there lies something secret in it that reaches a person's fantasies, feelings, experience and dreams, where other texts are helpless (Pulverness, 2007). Such features of literature establish its important role in an ESL classroom.

2.1. The Relationship between Literature and Language

The involvement and use of language in ESL classroom may be viewed based on its relationship with literature. Widdowson (1971) claimed that we find context for language use in literature because literature provides us with language in actual use. The study of language involving literary texts has been viewed as enhancing

the positive learning regarding various aspects of language organization in the learner. Carter (1986) recommended that we should not separate literature from language on the basis of its literariness as it is closely related with language in an integrated ESL classroom. Moreover, Short and Candlin (1986) suggested that language and literature should be interlinked for the sake of mutual reinforcement. Such bonding may increase language learning activities in contexts where student centered learning is employed.

2.2. The Role of Literary Texts in English as a Second Language Classroom in Enhancing Writing Skills

Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are the four skills that define the aims of language teaching. Speaking and listening skills use the aural medium for their expression, while reading and writing skills use the visual medium (Widdowson, 1990). Listening and reading are categorized as receptive skills, while writing and speaking are categorized as productive skills. All these four language skills are involved in reading a literary text.

In the process of writing such as learning spelling, punctuation, sentence structure and during the development and organization of ideas, great difficulty is faced by young ESL learners. They become aware of the general 'sound' and 'feel' of a foreign language through literary texts, such as short stories and novels. The use of literary texts increases the knowledge of learners with respect to vocabulary items and sentence construction (Wright, 1997). According to Pavey (1967) and Marquardt (1968), literary texts are replete with spectacular examples of linguistic forms. McKay (1982) elaborated that reading helps to develop the interaction with the text by decoding the language. The exploration of literary texts not only 'constitutes real content' (Gajdusek, 1988) but also acts as a stimulus for writing and exposition (Spack, 1985).

Miller opined that it is commonly accepted by the teachers of English composition that the use of literature is an effective means to improve students' learning. By the inclusion of literature, the teachers experience a kind of involvement in the ESL composition class. Literature imparts pleasure but it serves many other purposes as well. A significant advantage of literature is that it helps students to write in a better way. Miller argued that both reading and writing are associated with each other, so writing may not be separated from reading. Reading leads to the development of language skills. He also argued that literature helps students to improve composition; when students read literary texts they institute the great characteristics of great prose that is found only in these texts. They explore the themes of a given text and analyze the features of the characters in it and this

trait of literature leads to the process of learning how to write well. Literature is replete with a variety of sentence structures, precise diction, rich metaphors, and even successful paragraphing. This rich material is ideal to impart students a large number of possibilities for using the language effectively.

Literary texts enrich the sources of classroom activities and they can be motivational and helpful for language learners. Langer (1997) interpreted that literature develops critical thinking and interpretative skills of students. An interesting story and/or a fine piece of verse leave long lasting impressions and they can touch the hearts of the learners. Furthermore, literary texts in dialogue form eliminate aspects of traditional language class and make the students use their own creativity. Many ESL scholars (Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1994; Carter & Long, 1996; Maley, 2001) pointed out the plus points of using literary texts in language teaching classroom. Collie and Slater (1990) suggested that the need for valuable and authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement can lead the instructor in a language classroom to use literary texts.

Literary texts in contrast with informative material can be boosting and stimulating in the learning process of new languages and can prove to be more useful. ESL / EFL learners should be exposed to new ideas and methodologies of language use. Carter (1986) pointed out that authentic literary texts respond directly with language in a linguistic context. It builds the worth of literature to be taught in English language classes because it stands as a model for how language students should be exposed to a variety of forms and various conventions (Collie & Slater, 1994).

Literary texts increase students' intellect and understanding of all languages as they hold real life examples of vocabulary and syntactic structures. According to Maley (2001), language of literary texts is far richer than the language sample provided by textbooks. Students may develop various features of the pertaining written language such as formation of sentences, variety of structures, and ways to connect ideas (Collie & Slater, 1994). Widdowson (1975) also pointed out that students are encouraged and motivated when they are exposed to literary language and they think and learn about the norms of language use. They become familiarized with a variety of language uses in relevant contexts because of such exposure.

Hedge (1985) stated that at the levels of vocabulary, syntax and textual organization, literary texts are a way to enhance students' competence of language as far as linguistic reason is concerned. Kramsch and Kramsch (2000) also valued the role played by literary texts in developing vocabulary acquisition, reading

strategies, reasoning skills and critical thinking in the process of communicative language teaching. It refers to the variety in ideas which creates variety in discussion and it generates the idea that literary texts boost interactions (Duff & Maley, 2007; Clandfield, 2006). Verhoeven (1999) argued that L2 and L1 reading is not that much different in principle and it can be learnt through the same techniques and methodologies.

Spack (1985) stated that exploring literary texts in ESL / EFL classroom serves as stimulus for writing and composition. Shih (1986) backed this idea saying that such situations provide handy explanations for a ‘content-based’ class when interdepartmental rescheduling is difficult to manage.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Paradigm

The study used the qualitative approach. It is an “inquiry process of understanding” where the researcher takes into account “complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of information and conducts the study in natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p.15). As far as the approach of the current study is concerned, the researchers’ claims are based on the constructivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). What makes qualitative researches interesting to understand is the meaning constructed by people based on their observations of the world around them and their experiences in it (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

3.2. Participants of the Study

The study population comprised elementary level ESL learners and the teachers who used literature for teaching language in English language classes.

3.3. Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

A convenient non-probability sample of the study population was used for data collection. There is no predetermined sample size for qualitative research. Hence, during data collection, the researcher waits until the data saturation point is reached and the researcher feels that there is no need to collect further information (Creswell, 2003). The school was selected purposively to provide the setting for the current study. The school had two branches, one for girls and one for boys. It included literary texts in its ESL curriculum. It helped effectively in the data collection process. There were two groups targeted in this study. The first group of six English language teachers, who were teaching literature in the language classroom, was selected for answering the questionnaire. The second group comprised 7th and 8th grade students of the school. Out of all students, 30 were

selected for answering the questionnaire using the convenient sampling technique. Ten more students were selected for semi-structured interviews through purposive sampling to secure their opinions. The questionnaire for ESL teachers provided sufficient empirical information regarding the research issues and the information collected through document analysis not only supplemented but also reflected deeply on those themes. It is quite necessary to shed light on a few salient features of the research methods used in this study in order to provide the justification for using these methods.

3.4. Data Gathering Instruments

In order to collect data from the samples of the target population, an open-ended questionnaire administered on the teachers and document analysis of the students' writing samples were employed as instruments. In order to make constructs for the questionnaire, the researcher made a thorough review of the previously conducted studies in this regard. Before the instruments were materialized, a pilot study was carried out with 3 teachers in order to ensure instrumental validity. As far as document analysis is concerned, an authentic ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al, [1981](#), p.30) was employed in the study as a rubric to analyze students' writing samples. Consequently, students' notebooks were examined to get insight into the influence of literary texts on their writing. Randomly, 20 samples of students' writing were collected for examination. The study particularly probed into the effects of literary texts on the writing skill of ESL learners.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

This section briefly describes the data analysis procedures employed in the current study. Qualitative data collected through the open-ended questionnaire and document analysis were investigated, coded, synthesized and categorized into a few significant categories based on thematic analysis (Boyatzis, [1998](#), 4), which is the process used for encoding qualitative information.

The data collected through document analysis, that is, students' writing samples were analyzed and tabulated by categorizing their writing skill in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics using ESL Profile Composition. The findings were discussed in order to investigate and report the results as accurately as possible. Finally, the researchers drew conclusions inductively and recommendations were forwarded.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Findings of the Open-Ended Questionnaire Conducted with the Teachers

An open-ended questionnaire was conducted with those teachers who used literary texts in ESL classroom at elementary level. The findings along with the categories of data are stated below.

4.2. Role of Literary Texts in Making Reading Enjoyable

The teachers were asked whether the students enjoyed reading literary texts and to what extent they were personally engaged in these texts. The teachers gave the following opinions.

The teachers were of the view that students enjoyed reading a literary text. Indeed, they said that students up to 10th grade liked to study literary texts including short stories and novels. Novels captivated students more as compared to drama, especially the novels that were adventurous, contained supernatural elements and/or heroic characters. Students enjoyed reading literary texts because literature provided them with the representation of the society. They argued that the extent to which students enjoyed the text varied from one group of students to another. Moreover, it also depended on the selection of genre, teachers' interest, and institutes' goals in offering the texts as well as on teaching technique.

(T3) Yes they enjoy reading the literary text and they are engaged in the discussion on a literary text to a great extent. They feel delight and seek pleasure in reading text.

Along with the development of creativity and critical thinking, most of the teachers were of the view that students' interaction and knowledge of various cultures was enriched through the use of literary texts in the language classroom. The teachers also said that exposing students to literary texts helped them a lot in learning how to interact with and learn more from a foreign culture. A teacher said:

Literary texts did a great deal in exposing students to an English speaking environment, deeply. It made them aware of its different social and cultural background and it raised their knowledge and understanding of the English language, its slang, and idioms in a native like way.

From such statements, it may be assumed safely that the use of literary texts increase learners' cultural knowledge of the target language.

4.3. Role of Literary Texts in Developing the Written Expression

The responses of teachers in the above category are given below.

Students used literary texts for extensive reading, so they might learn a vast range of vocabulary items and also learn to use them (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in an effective way. Those who read the texts adopted their patterns of writing and unconsciously followed them in their own writing. They learned 'elaborations' through the use of adjectives and adverbs.

The teachers said that literary texts exhibit figurative language and helped students to learn it and use it accordingly in their own communication. It also helped them to enhance logical reasoning and imaginative power. Reading literary texts made them use figures of speech. They learned to appreciate literary writings and imitated their style. They also learned to use figures of speech to develop a better written expression. Literary texts developed a literary sense among students which helped them to present their thoughts and ideas in an effective way.

The teachers stated that while using a literary text students followed its scheme and pattern of thought. They also kept an eye on their development. They learned to present their thoughts and ideas in a most effective and systematic manner. A teacher said:

(T1) It is not much improved through reading.

The teachers were asked how far the use of literature did expose students to new words and phrases and their opinions are stated below.

The teachers said that reading literary texts added to students' repository of words and phrases, while the level of improvement varied from individual to individual depending upon different factors including interest and passion etc. The more they read literary texts, the fluent they became in using new words and phrases. Literary texts are a great source of vocabulary acquisition. Some words stick in mind as they might constitute the title of some drama, novel etc.

(T3) It enhances their vocabulary. They learn many new words and phrases. They enrich their vocabulary and literature broadens their vision. It adds valuable words and phrases in their memory.

4.4. Role of Literary Texts in Organizing Compositions

The teachers gave the following opinions.

The teachers viewed that while reading literature students were exposed to a variety of writing styles which presented them with different models of sentence

structure to follow. Literary texts are of different types such as plays, novels, short stories, essays, poems etc. Each type presents ideas differently. It helped students to polish their writing skills and to learn the art of composing their writing in an organized way. Students learned to follow or imitate ideas and patterns as well.

(T6) While reading standard and native writers they discover new patterns and they consciously use these patterns while writing their composition.

4.5. Role of Literary Texts in Increasing Vocabulary

The teachers gave the following opinions.

Reading new literary texts helped students to add words to their lexicon. They unconsciously continued to build their vocabulary while getting input from these texts. If a word was the motif of a text or was repeated again and again, it was helpful to understand it for re-use. Literary texts helped a lot to increase the vocabulary.

They helped students to build up their own vocabulary in every possible way. They learned new active and passive words. They used them in their spoken and written scripts.

4.6. Role of Literary Texts in Exposing Features of Written Language to Students

The teachers gave the following opinions.

Students learned new vocabulary items, sentence structures and most importantly, the pragmatic use of language. Texts were helpful for them to learn the features of written language but not to a great extent. The use of figures of speech and vocabulary is common in all languages. If a new feature means a new technique to describe an idea then it is not as helpful, since we can't stop an Urdu writer from using an English feature. Themes help to understand the features of the society and less that of language. Literary texts expose many features of the written language to students. They broaden their skills. They expose them to new words, new written expressions, grammatical structures, and development of thought.

4.7. Role of Literary Texts in Developing Creativity in Writing

The teachers gave the following views.

Reading literary texts didn't ensure creativity among students. There are other important factors such as individual talent, motivational level and of course, opportunities for the development of creative skills. A good reader makes a good writer. Reading of literary text developed creative skills among students. They tried

to imitate the written expression and style of different writers. It helped to broaden their minds. They explored those imaginative realms which otherwise needed great contemplation and concentration. So, it is obvious that the element of creativity was enhanced by the reading of texts.

4.8. Influence of Literature on Sentence Structure

The opinions of teachers regarding the influence of reading literary texts on students' sentence structure (simple, compound, complex, complex compound) are given below.

Students were exposed to a variety of sentence structures that also influenced their own patterns of written expression. They influenced students' syntactical knowledge to a great extent. They learned new sentence structures. Especially, prose writers exposed unique structures to them. They were able to make sense of these structures and use them effectively. The teachers also said that to some extent it helped the students to make sentences ranging from simple to complex sentences. However, it was not reading only; it also involved the training of grammatical structures. Literary texts presented a variety of sentence structures which influenced students to learn the art of constructing all types of sentences, that is, from simple to complex and compound sentences.

4.9. Findings of Document Analysis

ESL Composition Profile

Table 1
Analysis of Writing Samples

Criteria	Excellent (7)	Very good (6)	Good (5)	Average (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very poor (1)
Content	30%	40%	15%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Organization	20%	50%	15%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Vocabulary	30%	45%	10%	5%	5%	5%	
Language Use	10%	55%	25%	10%	5%	5%	
Mechanics	25%	45%	10%	10%	5%	5%	

In order to analyze students' writing samples, ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al, [1981](#), p.30) was used as a bench mark. Content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics were the themes according to which writing samples were analyzed and rated as excellent, very good, good, fair, poor and very poor. Twenty samples of students' classwork were taken and analyzed by the current researchers.

4.10. Content

Thirty percent of writing samples were marked as ‘excellent’ and forty percent as ‘very good’. A writing sample was either categorized as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ if it was knowledgeable, substantive and contained a thorough development of the thesis relevant to the assigned topic. Fifteen percent of samples were marked as ‘good’ and five percent as ‘average’. It means that there was some knowledge of subject, adequate range, and limited development of thesis relevant to the topic but it lacked details. Five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘fair’ and another five percent as ‘poor’. If the topic was categorized as either, it means that there was limited knowledge of subject, little substance, and inadequate development of the topic. Another five percent of writing samples were characterized as ‘very poor’. It means that they did not show the knowledge of the topic. Moreover, they were not substantive and pertinent.

4.11. Organization

Twenty percent of writing samples were marked as ‘excellent’ and fifty percent were marked as ‘very good’. If the organization was categorized either as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, it means that there was fluent expression, ideas were clearly stated and supported by evidence. Moreover, they were succinct, well organized, logically sequenced and cohesive. Fifteen percent of writing samples were marked as ‘good’ and five percent as ‘average’. If the organization was categorized as either ‘good’ or ‘average’, it means that the sample was somewhat choppy and loosely organized. The main ideas stood out but with limited support and there was logical but incomplete sequencing. Five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘fair’ and another five percent as ‘poor’. If the organization was categorized as either ‘fair’ or ‘poor’, it means that the sample was non-fluent, ideas were confused or disconnected, and it lacked logical sequencing and development. Five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘very poor’ which means that they did not communicate any meaning because they were not organized and presented properly.

4.12. Vocabulary

Thirty percent of writing samples were marked as ‘excellent’ and forty five percent as ‘very good’. If the vocabulary was categorized as either ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, it means that there was a sophisticated range of words supplemented with effective word choice and usage, word form mastery, and an appropriate register. Ten percent of writing samples were marked as ‘good’ and five percent as ‘average’, which means that there was an adequate range along with occasional

errors. Five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘poor’, which means that there was limited range, frequent errors of word idiom, form / choice / usage, meaning confused and/or obscured. Ten percent of samples were marked as ‘very poor’, which means that there was essentially translation, little knowledge of English vocabulary, idiom, and word form.

4.13. Language Use

Ten percent of writing samples were marked as ‘excellent’ and fifty five percent as ‘very good’. As far as language use is concerned, it was categorized as either ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ if there was effective construction as well as few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order / function, articles, pronouns, and prepositions. Twenty-five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘good’ and ten percent as ‘average’, which means that there was simple but effective construction, minor problems in complex constructions, several errors of agreement, tense number, word order / function, articles, pronouns, and prepositions, although meaning was seldom obscured. Five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘fair’ and another five percent as ‘poor’, which means that there were major problems in simple / complex constructions as well as frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order / function, articles, pronouns, and prepositions. Moreover, meaning was confused and obscured. None of the samples were marked as ‘very poor’.

4.14. Mechanics

Twenty-five percent of writing samples were marked as ‘excellent’ and forty five percent as ‘very good’. A sample of writing was categorized as either ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ if it demonstrated the mastery of convention, few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. Ten percent of writing samples were marked as ‘good’ and another ten percent as ‘average’, which means that there were occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing, although meaning was not obscured. None of the samples were marked as ‘fair’, ‘poor’ and ‘very poor’.

5. Conclusion

The findings from teachers’ and students’ data showed that reading literary texts contributed a lot in the development of the written expression of ESL learners. Due to extensive reading, students learn and use parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in a better way. While reading literary texts, they study language in use and consequently follow the patterns of its use in their own writing. Students’ responses also proved that reading literary texts improved their

knowledge of the English language. It is assumed based on the teachers' and students' responses that literature is a powerful tool that motivates ESL learners to write because it serves both as subject matter and as a model.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Do the students enjoy reading the literary text and to what extent they are personally engaged in these texts?
2. To what extent literary text contributes to the development of written expression in the students like
 - Proper use of adjectives and adverbs
 - Figures of speech
 - Effective presentation of thoughts
3. How far does the use of literature expose students to new words and phrases?
4. How much the use of new patterns students discover in organizing their compositions?
5. In what ways do literary texts help students to increase their vocabulary?
6. How far do literary texts expose many features of written language to students that can broaden learners' skills?
7. How far do literary texts help students to develop creativity in their writing?
8. How far do reading literary texts influence students' sentence structure (simple, compound, complex, complex compound?)

ESL composition Profile

Student Name:

Topic:

Criteria	Excellent (7)	Very good (6)	Good (5)	Average (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very poor (1)
Content							
Organization							
Vocabulary							
Language Use							
Mechanics							

Analyst's comments: